188

1935

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Bureau of Fisheries
WASHINGTON

Mem. S-20
Five pages
Page 1.

CANNING SALMON

(From "Pacific Salmon Fisheries," by John N. Cobb, pp. 115-118, Appendix 1 to the Report of the U.S. Commissioner of Fisheries for 1921.)

Dressing

A number of the small canneries still use the old hand method of dressing the fish, and in such places the selection of the butchering or dressing gangs is of prime importance. Two men constitute a "butcher's gang", and the number of these gangs is dependent upon the output of the plant. Boys place the fish, with the head out, upon the cutting tables. One man cuts off the heads, and is followed by another who removes the fins, tails, and viscera. The offal is thrown into a chute, whence it passes into the water under the cannery or into a scow moored underneath, while the dressed fish is transferred to a tank of water, to be scaled, washed, and scraped. It is then passed to another tank of water, where it receives a second washing, scraping, and final brushing with a whisk-like broom, which removes any offal, blood, and scales that were overlooked in the first washing, after which it is removed to large bins on either side of the cutting machine.

The most useful cannery inventions in recent years have been of machines for doing the work of the dressing gangs. The one commonly known as the "Iron Chink", now in general use in canneries where such machines are employed, was first used in 1903 at Fairhaven (Now Bellingham), Washington. It removes the head, tail, and fins and opens and thoroughly cleans the fish ready to cut into pieces for the cans. By the use of these machines the dressing gang is almost entirely done away with, dispensing with 15 to 20 men. This same machine is now so arranged that the fish after dressing are also "slimed;" i.e., the thick mucus covering the skin removed, and the inside of the fish cleaned.

Cutting

The usual method of cutting the salmon is by a machine. This is generally a large wooden cylindrical carrier, elliptical in shape, thus having a larger carrying capacity. Ledges or rests on the outside the length of the carrier are wide enough to hold the fish, and are slit in cross section through the ledges and outer casing to receive the gang knives. The latter are circular, fixed on an axle at the proper distances apart, and revolve at the highest point reached by the carrier and independently of the latter. The carrier and gang knives are set in motion, each revolving on its own shaft. As a rest on the carrier comes to a horizontal position, men stationed at the fish bins lay a fish on each ledge as it passes. Thence it is conveyed to the revolving gang knives and, after being divided, passes through on the downward course, sliding off the rest into the filling chute. The knives in these machines are so arranged as to cut the fish transversely in sections the exact length of the cans to be filled.

The rotary cutter shunts the tail pieces to one side, and these are carried by means of a chute to baskets. The tail pieces are generally canned separately. As the tail portion is much smaller, with less meat, it can not be placed in the cans with the middle and head sections without detracting from their value, but if packed under a distinct and separate label, as is now done, there is no reason why the tails should not supply the demand for a cheap grade of fish.

In some of the smaller canneries, especially in those packing flat cans, the gang knives are worked by hand. In this case, the knives are not circular, but elongaged or semicircular in shape, tapering at the outer ends. They are mounted on an axle having a large iron lever at one end, and when this lever is raised the ends of the gang knives are thrown up and back. The fish is then placed in position under them and the lever pulled forward, the knives, with a scimitar-like movement, dividing the fish.

The original method of cutting was by means of a long knife wielded by a Chinaman who stood at a regular butcher's block. Although his strokes were incredibly quick, the rotary cutting machine is a vast improvement over the old way.

Salting.

Every can of salmon is seasoned with one-fourth of an ounce of salt, which, to insure uniformity, is added by mechanical means. A table is used, in the top of which are holes equal distances apart. On the underside of the top is a sheet-iron plate, with an equal number of holes, which slides in a groove at the sides, and is worked either by a hand or foot lever. Just below is an open space large enough to accommodate a tray holding 36 or 48 cans. A workman stands in front of a table and slides a tray of cans into the open space. He then throws a quantity of salt upon the table and immediately scrapes this off with a thin piece of wood, each hole being filled in the operation, and the salt being prevented from falling through by the iron plate underneath. The lever is then pressed, the iron plate moves forward until the holes in it are directly under the holes in the table top, when the salt drops through into the cans. This operation can be repeated four or five times in a minute. Most canneries now use a small salter attached to the filling machine and this deposits the required amount in the can as it is passing by on its way to be filled.

Filling the cans.

Most canneries now use filling machines for all sizes of cans, although a few, more particularly those packing flat and odd-sized cans, still fill by hand.

The filling machine consists of a chute with a belt to which are attached wire racks about 4 inches apart, set at an angle to prevent the salt from spilling out, into which the salted cans are fed from the floor above and pass into the machine. At the same time the divided sections of salmon pass down another chute into the mouth of what looks like a hand coffee mill. They pass through here down a smaller chute and are forced by two dogs into a receptacle through which the plunger, or filler, passes. Here the plunger comes opposite the open mouth of the empty can, which when it reaches this point is caught by a clasp or hook and held in front of the plunger, which is immediately thrust forward throug a chamber filled with salmon, cutting the fish longitudinally and at the same time filling the can. The next movement forces the can out upon the table. When running at full speed, one of these machines will fill about 80 cans a minute.

On being released by the clamp and rolling upon the table they are righted by a workman and pushed onto an endless belt, upon which they pass into the weighing machine. If of the proper weight, they pass through this machine, but if below the required weight the cans are shunted to one side, where workers add the quantity of fish needed, a supply of small bits being kept at hand for this purpose. Generally the cans overrun in weight, frequently as much as 2 or 3 ounces. Occasionally a can is weighed on a small balance scales in order to see that the machine is in perfect adjustment.

After passing the weighing machine, any bones and scraps of flesh which may be sticking out of the can are clipped away by workers armed with scissors.

In the hand method the fillers stand on each side of a long table with a trough running down the middle from end to end. This is filled with the cut pieces of salmon, and the fillers, usually women and children, put large pieces into the cans at first and then smaller pieces to occupy the vacant spaces.

From the weighing machine the cans pass to the clinching machine, which attaches the top of the can loosely to the body in such a way that it allows the air in the can to escape, yet prevents the fish from coming in direct contact with the steam of the exhaust box. Also the water resulting from the condensation of steam, which accumulates in the exhaust box, is kept from entering the can and thus bleaching the flesh.

In many plants the cans are washed by jets of water or steam directed against them in a closed box as they are passing from the clincher to the exhaust box.

The cans then pass into a steam exhauster, consisting in one type of a box about 30 feet in length, in which are three endless-chain belts running side by side. Under and over each belt are steam coils, and under each of the lower coils are single pipes, which through small holes throw jets of live steam upon the coils, creating an intense heat. The cans pass along the first belt, are then transferred to the second belt, on which they return to the entrance of the box, whence they pass to the third belt, and continuing along this to the end, pass out to the double seamer, the whole operation occupying from 5 to 15 minutes, preferably 15. One style of exhauster has 10 ovals formed by the pipe, and the cans pass along these from side to side of the exhauster until discharged at the far end. Another type is formed of a long tube through which the cans pass and are heated by perforated steam pipes. Upright exhausters, in which the cans travel along a spiral, are also in use. By this means the contents of the can are heated and the greater part of the air exhausted, which is the object of the first cooking in the retort under the method formerly in general use. In Alaska, where 1-pound tall cans form the bulk of the pack, the cans are exhausted at a temperature from 206° to 212° F., 210° being the favorite.

A recent invention, which the inventor claims will do away with the steam exhaust box, and thus save a large amount of valuable floor space in the canning "line," is the power vacuum pump, known as vacuum exhausting machine, by means of which air is exhausted from the cans, accomplishing the same purpose as the steam exhaust box. Some of these machines have been in active use for several seasons, with most satisfactory results.

Leaving the exhauster the cans pass to the double seamer, which fastens the cover on tightly with a double seam or crimp. It should be stated that no solder is used in attaching the top on the can, the curled flanges of the cover being coated around the outer edge, with cement or other sealing fluid to take its place. Solder, however, is used in joining the side seam of the can, this being done when the can is manufactured. The cans then leave the machine on an endless conveyor, pass through a machine which washes the outside of the cans, and thence to the men who transfer them to the coolers, which are immediately placed upon the trucks and run into the retort for the one cooking they are to receive. By the use of these cans the soldering machine used in the old-style method is done away with. It also does away with the first cooking and the subsequent venting and soldering, a saving both in labor and time consumed.

Cooking.

The processing time varies in each district and sometimes for each species. In Alaska 1-pound tall reds, cohos, chums, and pinks are generally cooked from 90 to 120 minutes, at 12 to 18 pounds pressure and at a temperature of 242° to 248° F. One-pound flats and half-pound cans are generally cooked about 10 minutes less time. Owing to their larger bones, king salmon are generally cooked from 10 to 20 minutes longer than the other species; steelhead trout also.

On Puget Sound 1-pound tall sockeyes, cohos, and pinks are generally cooked for 90 minutes at a pressure of 10 pounds and at a temperature of 240°F. Halves and 1-pound flats are generally cooked at the same temperature but only for 80 minutes. Chum talls are generally cooked for 105 minutes at a pressure of 10 pounds, and at a temperature of 240°; while spring or king salmon are cooked for 120 minutes at a pressure of 10 pounds and at a temperature of 240°F.

It is the custom of all canneries, no matter what the system, to allow about 5 minutes at the beginning of the cooking to work up the required heat of the retort, and when cooking is completed there is a like period for reducing the temperature and pressure before opening the doors. The cooking times given above are exclusive of the two 5-minute periods noted here.

It should be distinctly understood that the processing times noted are only approximate. The condition of the fish, the weather, whether hot or cold, rainy or dry, etc., all must be taken into account. The canner can not go far astray, however, if he keeps generally within the narrow margins noted above. In the early days much secrecy and mystery was thrown around the cooking, and the work was carried on in a separate room, known as the "bathroom", under lock and key. The first cooking was done in common tubs. The early retorts were made of wood. Later, round iron kettles were substituted, nearly one-half consisting of cover, and round crates were used for holding the cans. At the present time only rectangular horizontal iron or steel retorts are used, and access to these is had by means of miniature railroad tracks.

For many years cannery men believed that the double cooking of salmon was absolutely necessary, but in 1898 F. A. Seufert, at his cannery on the Columbia River, at Seuferts, Oreg., a short distance above The Dalles, discarded this idea, and has since used a one-cooking method. By the new process the cans are tested for leaks after the center hole in the top is soldered up, as before, and are left in the retort 70 minutes at 245°F. and 12 pounds steam pressure. According to its originator, this method saves more than one-half the labor in the bathroom, saves nearly one-half the labor in washing the cans after cooking and also better retains the color of the fish.

Note: The report from which this material is abstracted contains additional data on the subject under the following headings: Repairing Cans; Lacquering; Labeling; Brands; Boxing or Casing; Can Making; Canning Smoked Salmon; Home Canning; Inspection of Plants Packing Canned Salmon; Investigation of Canned Salmon Industry.

Fishery Industries
Washington, D. C.
Oct. 25, 1935.
EB - 600